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Rumsfeld to Make First Trip to Vietnam

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SINGAPORE -- Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld will make his first trip to Vietnam next week, as part of a broader effort to forge stronger military relationships with countries in Southeast Asia.

Speaking to reporters Friday at the start of an annual defense leaders' conference in Singapore, Rumsfeld said the U.S. military relationship with its former enemy is growing, and he said he hopes the conference will foster more inclusiveness in the region.

Rumsfeld said he will also visit Indonesia – which is still reeling from the effects of a devastating earthquake that left thousands dead. The Asian nations, he said, are working together to fight piracy, terrorism and other regional problems.

Rumsfeld is encouraging Southeast Asian nations to work closely with the U.S., in the face of pressure from China and Russia to at times exclude the U.S. from regional meetings.

Pentagon officials said Rumsfeld, who arrived in Singapore after a daylong, nonstop flight, will take a more positive approach than last year when he took direct aim at China's ongoing military buildup and the need for greater openness in that country.

Rumsfeld's visit – and his planned speech on Saturday – "will underscore the strategic importance of Asia," Pentagon spokesman Eric Ruff said. "The secretary's visit here demonstrates our commitment to Asia and to the friends and allies we have in this region."

Speaking en route to Singapore, a senior defense official said Rumsfeld would not dwell on lingering questions about China's closely held military growth. The official, who spoke on condition of anonymity because the speech was not public yet, said instead Rumsfeld would speak more broadly about the need for the countries to work together.

The Bush administration was concerned last year when the Association of South East Asian Nations met with representatives from China, Korea and Japan, but excluded the United States.

Southeast Asia is an important ally for the U.S., with its strategic location and nations, such as Indonesia, that are largely Muslim and have been allies in the war on terror.

Rumsfeld is scheduled to meet privately with a number of defense leaders from the region, including India's Defense Minister Pranab Mukherjee, who is making his first appearance at the conference, known as the Shangri-La Dialogue.

Representatives from about two dozen nations were invited to the meeting, which has been hosted by the International Institute for Strategic Studies for five years.

Rumsfeld has been an outspoken advocate of improving military relations with countries in Southeast Asia. He has complained that the United States "lost a generation of relationships" with the Indonesian military because of sanctions put in place because of human rights abuses by the military.

The gap in relations made it more difficult for the U.S. to gather support after the September 11, 2001, attacks.

Embattled countries in the region are struggling to expand their economies and boost trade, while also fighting terrorism and trying to grow and improve their militaries.

Their progress, however, depends on how successfully they can balance delicate alliances with the United States and China.

"We're not going to say don't play with China, that's not the way we do business," said Elizabeth C. Economy, director of Asia Studies at the Washington-based Council on Foreign Relations. "But we want to make sure our relations are the primary ones."

She said the war in Iraq has soured relations between the U.S. and some Southeast Asian countries. And only through more economic assistance and humanitarian support, such as the tsunami and earthquake aid, will the U.S. be able to bolster its military and foreign policy relationships with those countries.

James Lilly, former U.S. ambassador to Beijing and now at the American Enterprise Institute, said the Southeast Asian nations are walking a delicate line, trying to develop stronger ties both with the United States and China.

In addition to obstacles within the region, the Pentagon has critics at home who oppose increased military ties with some of the Asian nations, such as Indonesia.

Human rights groups have urged the United States to link any increased diplomatic ties to democratic progress.